

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE 3

CHRISTIAN SCIENCE MONITOR
17 April 1985

Reagan fights an uphill battle to win more aid for 'contras'

White House trails badly, say Capitol Hill vote-counters

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Washington

The White House, fresh from a come-from-behind victory to obtain new MX missiles, has begun its last-minute surge to win release of \$14 million in aid to rebel forces in Nicaragua.

But with the congressional vote only a week away, vote counters on Capitol Hill see the White House trailing badly, amid widespread skepticism about aiding the rebels, known as *contras*, fighting the pro-communist Nicaraguan government.

"People don't want to get involved in overthrowing another government," says

Christopher J. Matthews, spokesman for House Speaker Thomas P. O'Neill Jr. (D) of Massachusetts. The aide spoke confidently of defeating the humanitarian-aid proposal when the issue comes to a vote, probably April 23.

"I don't think there's any problem," he said, predicting that the Democratic House will go along with Democratic leaders to oppose the *contra* aid.

One of most experienced lobbyists on the issue, Susan Benda of the Center for National Security Studies, said Tuesday that foes of the aid have gained support during the past week. Opponents have

about a 30-vote lead in the House. And while the GOP-controlled Senate is expected to be more friendly to the Reagan administration plan, she says, "I think it's up for grabs" in the upper chamber.

President Reagan has begun high-stakes lobbying with strong words backing the *contras* and warning of dangers unless the United States takes a strong stand in Central America.

He said in a speech Monday night that a vote against aiding the *contras* in Nicaragua "is literally a vote against peace, because it invites the conditions that will lead to more fighting, new wars, and new bloodshed."

The President has won the support of a number of former administration officials, including Jeane J. Kirkpatrick, former US ambassador to the United Nations, who came to Capitol Hill Tuesday to defend Mr. Reagan's policies.

Another former official, Rav S. Cline, deputy director of the Central Intelligence Agency from 1962 to '66, also backed the President. Covert action, such as aid to contras, is "legitimate" to counter a serious threat to American interests,

he told the House Latin America subcommittee.

"Such a threat exists in Central America," Mr. Cline said. "The crucial conflict zone is Nicaragua, where a dictatorship supported directly by the Soviet Union and Cuba is trying to suppress liberty inside Nicaragua and export violence and instability across its borders."

Former CIA director Stansfield Turner told the same House panel that he had just visited Nicaragua and found no immediate threat to the US from the economically strapped country.

"The effort to centralize control of the economy is massive," said Admiral Turner, who served during the Carter administration. But he added that the result had been devastating. "Economic problems at home" have kept Nicaragua's Sandinista government from exporting revolution to other countries, he said. But he warned that in five to 10 years the country could become "a thorn in our side," like Cuba.

Turner argued that Congress should defer release of the aid for 120 days and ask Mr. Reagan to reopen negotiations with the Sandinistas to seek freedom from censorship and more rights for opposition leaders in the Central American country.

House Democratic leaders were meeting as of this writing to work out a possible alternative approach to the *contra* aid. But they appeared to be in a strong position to reject Reagan's proposal outright.



Adm. Turner: Nicaragua is no immediate threat